

"Wessyngton" (Joseph Washington House)
4 miles southwest of Cedar Hill
Cedar Hill Vicinity
Robertson County
Tennessee

HABS No. TENN-32

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. TENN-32

"WESSYNGTON" (JOSEPH WASHINGTON HOUSE)

Location: 4 miles southwest of Cedar Hill, Cedar Hill
Vicinity, Robertson County, Tennessee
Latitude: 36°30'04" Longitude: 87°00'15"

Present Owner: Wessyngton Company

Present Occupants: Mr. and Mrs. John T. Talbott

Present Use: Dwelling

Statement of Significance: This early Tennessee house has been owned continuously by the Washington family since it was built in 1819 for Joseph Washington. Of simple Federal style, the house contains much of its original furniture, family portraits, and library. The garden designed by its first mistress, Mary Cheatham Washington, remains much as it was planned.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1819
2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: Wessyngton has descended in the Washington family to the present time. At the death of Joseph Washington in 1848, the property was inherited by his son, George Augustine Washington, who at his death in 1892 left it to his son Joseph Edwin Washington. The latter died in 1915, leaving his entire estate to his widow, Mary Bolling Kemp Washington. At her death in 1946, the estate passed to her children, George A. Washington, Anne W. Blagden, and Elizabeth Hotchkiss. On June 23, 1956, they formed the Wessyngton Company.
4. Original plans and construction: The 1819 brick structure consisted of a central hall flanked by a room on either side and a one-room ell projecting to the south from the east room. The same plan was repeated on the second floor.
5. Alterations and additions: Around 1842--almost early enough for it to be considered with the main block of the

house--a wing consisting of a passage and two rooms was added on the west end of the west room for George Augustine Washington and his wife. It was used later as a nursery. The unit formed an L shape so that the entire house was roughly in the shape of a U. A two-story back porch ran across the south and west sides of the rear of the house. The dining room may also have been added around 1842. The dining-room addition was originally constructed without the bow window (the outside wall was flush with the rest of the house); and the small porch next to it had a "come-and-go" stairway--a curved stairway leading from each side of the porch. During the time the house was owned by Joseph Edwin Washington (1892-1915), the pediments over the north and east porches were removed and roof lines changed to the mansard form. A service wing was added to the southeast of the main house. (The exact dates of these alterations are not known by members of the family.) The mansard-roofed second-story servants' quarters may also have been added to the kitchen-laundry building when the porch roofs were changed to the mansard form. Originally built as a separate structure, the kitchen-laundry was at some point connected to the main house by a frame pantry addition behind the dining room. (A family photograph dated 1897 shows the kitchen-laundry building in its original single-story form, with the frame pantry addition already in place.) A frame addition on the south side of the house was added in 1905 as a temporary accommodation for the wedding guests at the marriage of Anne Washington to A. S. Blagden. Once painted white or gray, the house is now faded back to the brick.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Wessyngton's first owner, Joseph Washington, was descended from John Washington of Surry County, Virginia, who was the son of Sir John Washington of Thrapston, Northampton County, England. Joseph Washington came to Tennessee from Virginia in 1796 and purchased land along Sulphur Fork. By his marriage to Mary Cheatham, he acquired another large tract adjoining his own. A tobacco planter, his estate became famous for the quality and quantity of its tobacco output. His son, George Augustine Washington, was said to be the second largest individual grower of dark tobacco in the world--the Khedive of Egypt being the first.

Joseph Edwin Washington, grandson of the builder, served as a representative in the United States House of Representatives from 1887 to 1897.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Old views: A photograph in the possession of Mrs. George Frazer, Nashville, Tennessee, shows the house with its original porch.
2. Bibliography:
 - a. Primary and unpublished sources:

Interview with Mrs. George Frazer, Nashville, Tennessee.

Office of the Register of Deeds, Springfield, Robertson County, Tennessee.

Office of Robertson County Court Clerk, Springfield, Robertson County, Tennessee.

Mrs. John Talbott, to HABS, July 22, 1977, HABS Tennessee Administrative files, National Park Service, Washington, D. C.

Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee. Washington Papers.
 - b. Secondary and published sources:

Brandau, Roberta Seawell, ed. History of Homes and Gardens in Tennessee. Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1936, pp. 250-254.

Cochran, Gifford A. Grandeur in Tennessee. New York: J. J. Augustin, 1946, p. 33.

Prepared by John W. Kiser
Architectural Historian
National Park Service
Summer 1971

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Owned continuously by the Washington family since its construction in 1819, this Federal style brick house is the result of decorative and structural changes made by succeeding generations of the family.

2. Condition of fabric: Fair

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The main block of the house is two stories on a raised basement (five-bay front), with a two-story ell extending to the south from the southeast end of the rear wall and a one-and-a-half-story L-shaped wing on the west--giving the complex an approximately U shape. The over-all dimensions are 54' x 108'.
2. Foundations: Tennessee limestone
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Red brick, laid in Flemish bond.
4. Structural system, framing: Load bearing masonry walls.
5. Porches: At the main entrance there is a raised tetra-style, one-story wooden porch on a brick foundation. Its four square columns with modified Tuscan capitals and square bases support a full entablature and mansard roof. The porch is enclosed with a balustrade of simple square balusters (added for Anne Blagden around 1960), and is approached by five stone steps with iron handrails supported by slender twisted balusters. A porch with similar characteristics is located on the east side of the main block; its columns, however, have no bases, and the stairway of six stone steps has no handrails. On the east side of the dining-room wing, a small porch of carpenter-Gothic construction has a gabled hood with large supporting brackets and a tympanum which is incised with decorative work. The tympanum and the brackets are also pierced by openings which contain ornamental balls and spindles. This hooded porch has a balustrade of decorative turned balusters, and is approached by a stairway in two runs with landing. The area beneath the porch is screened with latticework. A raised L-shaped porch with balustrade runs along the west and south sides of the southeast ell. The porch is one story.
6. Chimneys: There are nine brick chimneys, including an outside end chimney on each gable end of the main block and at the gable end of the southeast ell, an inside chimney towards the gable end of the dining room wing, two inside end chimneys on the west wing, and three chimneys on the kitchen-laundry building--an outside end chimney on the east end, an inside end chimney on the west end, and an inside chimney between the kitchen and laundry. In general, the chimneys have corbeled caps.

7. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: The deeply recessed main entrance is located in the center of the north facade. Its arched wooden surround is decorated with a keystone and has pilaster capitals at the springing. The opening contains double wooden doors and a fanlight with intersecting tracery. The door and sidelights off the hooded east porch are glazed in their upper sections and have wooden panels below. The principal entrance to the west wing--located in the easternmost bay of the north facade--has wooden architrave trim and plinth blocks, a flat arch of bricks, and a stone sill. At this doorway there are two operable wooden shutters--each with two panels of louvers--and a run of five wooden steps without handrails.
- b. Windows and shutters: In general, the window openings contain twelve-over-twelve-light double-hung wooden sash on the first level, and twelve-over-eight on the second. However, the tall, narrow windows of the dining room wing are one-over-one double-hung sash with transoms, the latter having small panes of glass around the perimeter; between two of these windows, under the eaves on the bowed east elevation, there is a long horizontal window of three-light fixed sash with a border of small glass panes. In the front and rear mansards of the kitchen-laundry wing, there are pedimented half dormers whose vertical faces are flush with and a continuation of the brick wall. The dormer window openings are segmentally arched and contain six-over-six double-hung wooden sash. The first-floor windows of this wing are also double-hung wooden sash.

Almost every window has a pair of operable louvered wooden shutters--single-panel in the main block, two-panel in the west wing, and three-panel in the dining room wing. Pairs of small windows in each of the main gables have a single louvered shutter per window. There are board shutters at the first-level windows on the rear of the kitchen-laundry wing.

8. Roof: The house has gable roofs and overhanging eaves, a simple cornice--altered to receive modern rain gutters--and heavy wooden brackets at the corners of the major facades; the shingles are of asphalt. The rear pantry addition which connects the dining room with the kitchen-laundry building has standing-seam metal roofing. Mansard roofs cover the main entrance porch, the east porch of the main block, and the kitchen-laundry building. A metal rain-water head is located under the eaves on the northeast

corner of the east elevation, where it now serves only a decorative purpose. It consists of three tapered sections separated by moldings; the uppermost section is topped with a cornice. On the front there are, from top to bottom section, respectively, a three-dimensional eagle figure, the inscribed initials "J.W.," and the date 1819. On the two exposed sides there are, from top to bottom, a metal new moon and two stars.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: The center entrance hall in the original main block contains the principal stairway and leads to the library and parlor on the east, the living room to the south, and three bedrooms on the west--one in the main block, and two, plus a passageway, in the west wing. The dining room is an addition south of the library and parlor; behind it, a pantry connects the main house with the kitchen-laundry building on the southeast. Bedrooms are disposed off the center hall on the second floor. There is a small unfinished attic over the main block. The servants' quarters are located in the second-floor addition to the kitchen-laundry building.
2. Stairways: The principal stairway is located on the east side of the main entrance hall. It is an open-well, open-string, full-return stair with two landings, ascending in three runs to the second floor. It has a molded handrail and square balusters, two to the tread; the handrail terminates in a simple newel post. The face of the string is decorated with pellet molding; the lower edge is finished with a scalloped molding.
3. Flooring: Ash and poplar flooring.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Papered plaster on load bearing masonry. The wallpaper in the center entrance hall is decorated with flowers and feather-like foliage on winding tendrils. It has a beige-yellow background with white flocking. The design is in blue-green. The family believes the wallpaper is American and that it was hung in the 1930s, when several other rooms were papered.
5. Doorways and doors: In general the doorways have fluted trim with corner blocks, and deep reveals and soffits with molded wooden panels. The doors are of the six-panel "colonial" type. The main entrance is arched and has a wooden surround with keystone and fluted Roman doric pilasters. The opening contains double wooden doors, each leaf having three tiers of vertical panels; the fanlight above is decorated with intersecting tracery.

6. Trim: Molded wooden cornices and baseboards.
7. Hardware: The main entrance door has an iron box lock with white porcelain knob, and an iron headbolt and foot-bolt.
8. Lighting: Suspended from the ceiling in the main entrance hall there is a hexagonal brass lantern with filagree crown, a tracery of filagree on its six tapered glass sides, and an inverted filagree crown at its base. This lantern is operated by electricity. The Tiffany chandelier in the dining room, originally gas burning, was converted to electricity.
9. Heating: Coal furnace sending hot water through radiators. Converted to fuel oil in 1971.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house is located on top of a hill in a setting of large old trees. The front facade faces north.
2. Historic landscape design: The shape of the original flower garden east of the house has been preserved. The family cemetery is located nearby.
3. Outbuildings: The outbuildings consist of a brick smoke-house, dairy house, and plantation office; a round wooden gazebo with latticed balustrade and domed roof whose eight square supporting columns are bracketed on each side at the cornice; a cylindrical metal water tower with octagonal platform, octagonal roof, and a cornice with pendant decoration of continuous, unspaced wooden lozenges; and in a field some distance from the house, one of the world's largest wooden tobacco barns. There is also a modern, frame, farm manager's house.

Prepared by Roy C. Pledger
Supervisory Architect
National Park Service
July 1971

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were made during the summer of 1971 as part of a co-operative project of the National Park Service, the Tennessee Historical Commission, and the Historic Sites Federation of Tennessee. The work represented the second phase of an extensive recording program

to document the historic architecture of Middle Tennessee and involved the recording of structures in the counties surrounding Nashville.

The project was under the direction of James C. Massey, at that time Chief of the Historic American Buildings Survey. Supervisor of the recording team was Prof. Roy C. Pledger of Texas A&M University. The team was composed of John W. Kiser, Architectural Historian (University of Tennessee); Daryl P. Fortier, Architect (University of Minnesota); and student architects Gilbert M. Glaubinger (Rhode Island School of Design), Steve P. Roberts (Ohio State University), and Barry S. Williams (Texas A&M University). Photographs were made by Jack E. Boucher, HABS staff photographer. Under the direction of John Poppeliers, Chief, HABS, an editorial project was undertaken in 1976 by Ursula M. Theobald, Writer-Editor.